

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND THE SCIENCE- AND-RELIGION DISCUSSION

by James F. Moore

Abstract. The science-and-religion dialogue has so often assumed that the key issues for discussion are those that have arisen within the Western Christian religious and intellectual tradition that little interest has been devoted to the possible insights that the presence of non-Christian voices in the dialogue might bring. In the following I explore the benefits of a truly multireligious dialogue on science and religion and offer a model for integrating various religious perspectives into the science-and-religion dialogue. Of course, taking the multifaith perspectives of the religions seriously also means making a dialogue between religions a component of the science-and-religion dialogue, and I discuss how such a dialogue might unfold along with key ideas that might emerge in ever more interesting ways once the dialogue begins.

Keywords: design; dialogue; ethics; mystery; pluralism.

Many of us believe that any productive dialogue between religion and science must expand to include the whole range of religions. Nevertheless, it is not so clear what approach is best for assuring that each religious tradition is appropriately represented in the conversation. This essay aims to take up that challenge by suggesting both a set of preliminary foci for an interfaith dialogue on science and religion and a working model for making sure that the dialogue actually integrates both the various views from the religions and the interests of the ongoing religion-and-science dialogue. I do this by using the results of an actual dialogue sponsored by the Zygon Center for Religion and Science; the participants met for the first time in

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June of 2000. I address five points that organized these discussions: (1) the effect of bringing differing cultural perspectives together; (2) the discovery of convergence on the notion of mystery; (3) the recognition that all religions have long traditions of thinking about design that predate modern science; (4) the finding of a common interest in the practical (practice); and (5) the addition of perspectives from all traditions that will allow us to accept ambiguity (both/and, not either/or).

THE EFFECT OF BRINGING DIFFERENT CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES TOGETHER

Naturally, any face-to-face conversation surprises the participants. In fact a multireligious conversation might be the most surprising, because we expect to encounter difficulties from the outset on the most basic level of cultural difference and the different use and understanding of ideas. Although this difference may be obvious (Buddhism, for example, includes a worldview that is incompatible with most Western religious perspectives), I have discovered that conversation across the boundaries has been surprisingly easy. Even so, what happens in the discussion is that we discover how the issues allow for a meeting ground that makes dialogue much easier than might at first be expected. What we discover is not so much the difference between religious traditions as the wide range of viewpoints found *within* religious traditions. Indeed, each religious tradition includes a variety that can produce greater agreement across religious boundaries and cultures than might be found within a tradition. As surprising as this may be, the implication for a dialogue such as the one we attempted, and ultimately for the participation of the religions in a religion-and-science dialogue, is significant. The simple point is that dialogue depends on who from within the traditions is invited to participate. This is an issue for any intercultural dialogue but is often not made explicit in the religion-and-science dialogue. More significant, however, is the recognition that there is no single Christian or Jewish or Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist view that can be called the genuine view of that tradition. This is not to say that there are no fundamental beliefs held in common or that there are no criteria for judging what is or is not acceptable for each tradition. The point is that when discussions take place on issues that require further interpretations of inherited traditions, a wide range of perspectives exists (and has always existed) within each religious tradition.

We do not need to try to include every possible version of a religious tradition in our discussions, but we do need to recognize that any discussion includes only some of the possible views. We need to think of religions as pluralistic entities, and we need a model of dialogue that not only accounts for this plurality but also affirms it. This means that no conclusions can be seen as universal or finished, but all must be seen as provi-

sional. I believe that many of us understand this but have not yet fully incorporated it into the way we integrate religious traditions into the science-and-religion dialogue.

CONVERGENCE ON THE NOTION OF MYSTERY

One theme that emerges with remarkable consistency across religious traditions is the importance of mystery as a key religious belief. This idea surfaces especially when we address issues like the arguments from design (currently there is a renewed interest in this topic in some of the religion-and-science dialogue, e.g., Russell, Murphy, and Isham 1993, 367ff.), because such arguments can be seen as efforts to explain the structure of all reality. These arguments are also often efforts to describe and define the sacred (the divine, the spiritual dimension of reality), so one specific response is to recognize the mystery of God (the sacred). Of course, each tradition has its own development of this theme, but I would argue that *mystery* in religious beliefs does not mean the absence of knowledge or possible explanation. Thus, the assertion is not that God is introduced as an answer to some unsolved problem but that God (or the spiritual realm) as such is incomprehensible. This notion, I believe, appears in all the major religious traditions as a religious criterion.

The assertion of mystery is a criterion guarding against the premature closure of discussion. It is almost always a religious protection against claims to absolute truth and knowledge. The traditions each have elements of mysticism that may involve a belief in special knowledge or connection to the sacred (can we see this in Islamic Sufism, in the Jewish Kabbalah, or in the Christian mystics like Meister Eckardt?). These traditions of mysticism can be associated with the claim for mystery but are not essentially what I am arguing for here. Mysticism is in a way a claim that experience outside of purely empirical experiences can be evidence for truth claims and action. The claim of mystery is more an assertion that we cannot know fully than a support for special knowledge and sources of knowledge.

The assertion of mystery is also tied to the religious necessity for application to life. Thus, the assertion of mystery guards against absolutism in practice as well as in knowledge claims. It is a religious criterion that protects the vital pluralism within each tradition. We can assert not only that there is no single correct Hindu view but that there cannot ever be a single correct view, because the sacred is always beyond our capacity to know fully. Thus, we cannot assert our absolute superiority but must constantly engage in dialogue within the tradition. While this essential pluralism in religions may be frustrating to scientists, it is unavoidable if the dialogue between religion and science is to be genuine. The temptation is to believe

that one religious view, the one that seems good to us or seems most compatible with the sciences, is the correct view. This temptation must be avoided. On the other hand, being open to explore new ideas and possibilities that are always present in traditions gives a far richer view of the religions for the purposes of engaging the ever-changing landscape of the contemporary sciences.

RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS OF THINKING ABOUT DESIGN THAT PREDATE MODERN SCIENCE

We may first look at the current debate on arguments from design. Naturally, any scholar of the religions can give a view from the traditions that points to very old discussions on themes of design in the universe. This shows us at least three things about our dialogue.

First, religions not only represent a multitude of perspectives on beliefs but also have often long traditions of discussion on the themes that now engage us. Usually these discussions have already sorted through issues toward solutions that recent discussions tend to ignore. At the very least, we could benefit from the history of conversation in the religions so as to move more quickly past claims that have already been discarded for good reasons.

Second, the long histories of discussion on matters of design within religious traditions mean that we have a wide variety of views about design that can potentially contribute to our present discussion—is there evidence for design? Even if we see extraordinary convergence of views, we also recognize that the nuances from different religions are influenced by particular cultural factors that can be sources of genuinely new insight if allowed to be part of the wider discussion. The great difficulty with much recent discussion is that it often assumes a view of religion, of the sacred, and of God that is essentially Christian (or, even more narrowly, Protestant, or perhaps simply Western philosophical). Thus, the concurrent discussions in Islam and Judaism hardly ever get integrated into the wider science-and-religion discussion, not to mention the absence of important similar efforts in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, each of which assumes a general view of reality that differs significantly from the view of Western Protestant Christians.

Third, historical discussions in the religious traditions almost always predate most recent developments in the sciences and in some cases predate all of the findings of modern science since the sixteenth century. Thus, the science-religion dialogue can be important for the religions, because in the context of a science-and-religion dialogue the religions can revisit arguments and themes and test them against the current general views in cosmology and evolutionary biology. Is the discussion now radically new because our current view of reality, shaped by the models of the Big Bang

and evolutionary theory, is radically different from views held in the past? This is a point worth considering for religions searching their own traditions for models that can account for the universe as we now understand it.

FINDING A COMMON INTEREST IN THE PRACTICAL (PRACTICE)

Interreligious discussions quickly reveal one aspect of religions that must be part of any dialogue between the religions and science: the practical dimension. Now, the point is not merely the impact on or relation to the practice of religion, including the way that religion shapes a lifestyle, but also the impact on praxis, on issues of personal and social significance. Any essentially academic discussion can potentially set aside this central religious concern and ignore it in favor of the discussion of ideas, but an interreligious conversation cannot do this and be true to its sources and communities. There is a basic interest among the participants in focusing attention on the moral implications of the discussion as well as the relation of the discussion to matters of religious piety.

We are reminded that the initial discussions of design in the traditions emerged as part of the life of religious communities, which means that they are engaged for the sake of applying the outcomes to the religious life. What does it mean for prayer, devotion, behavior, and worship to accept design in the universe—or to reject design, for that matter? The design argument is often connected directly to questions that religious people have about evil and suffering and injustice. Thus, the point is always practical at least in the dimension having to do with moral choices, motivations for social action, and sources of religious hope. These matters seem far removed from much of the religion-and-science dialogue, even if they might actually be key elements for many of the participants in that conversation.

But the concern for the practical if linked to the religious traditions quickly moves beyond religious practice to broader social concerns. Some are frustrated because academic discussions are often so detached from the social context that we do not account for their impact on key issues that people face in our own culture. If there is design, what does this mean for the presence of diseases like AIDS, for potential solutions like genetic engineering and manipulation, for social responsibility for those who are on the margins of our society, for commonly held values that at least move us closer to common action if not common belief? But if we are committed merely to advancing knowledge without also taking up matters of praxis, then can we say we are actually engaging in a religion-and-science dialogue?

THE ACCEPTANCE OF AMBIGUITY

Having raised the issue of the practical, we discover another aspect of religions that challenges the preconceived goals for dialogue held by some. Even if we see a necessity for the practical as part of, if not the final goal

for, dialogue, we also know that religions have dealt with the everydayness of life in ways that allow for the presence of disparate, even seemingly contradictory, ideas. In fact, the religions' potential as a source for knowledge is often found in their ability to hold such conflicting notions and contrasting perspectives together in tension, allowing that both can be valid. Thus, there is an inherent *both/and* character of religious thinking rather than *either/or*. There is no quick necessity to resolve the tension, especially if experience shows that both views have important practical value.

Is it possible that the goal of this dialogue is more to uncover these radical polarities and hold them together (often the narrative style of the religions is one way to manage this delicate balancing act) than to reach defensible single solutions or viewpoints? Of course, many of the worst events in religious histories have occurred when the religious leadership (or communities as a whole) attempted to eliminate this natural tension of difference in efforts to define heresies, or create fundamentalist autocracies, or assume absolute religious authority as a justification for the abuse of political power. But if religions have learned that reductionist solutions in the social realm can be harmful, can this lesson be translated into a value for the religion-and-science dialogue? I would argue that this can happen if a wide variety of religious views are present in our dialogue.

AN ETHIC OF DIALOGUE/A DIALOGICAL ETHIC

We must move forward with an attempt to incorporate what we have learned in ways that make dialogue possible. We have learned the need to accept plurality and take it seriously in our dialogue. We have learned that, while certain themes do seem to be common ground for different religions, these themes are precisely the arena where the religious need to preserve ambiguities and options is reinforced; this is the very need that makes dialogue with the sciences so difficult. In addition, the religions have a basic tendency toward the practical, and this means the particular, whereas the sciences have a tendency toward the theoretical/empirical and thus to the general. On the other hand, the sciences do lead us toward ethical/practical implications, and this becomes a basis for our wider conversation.

But we proceed also within a framework of understanding dialogue and learning how a conversation can be productive. There are basic rules of engagement that must be accepted as a sort of ethic of dialogue. Paul Ricoeur has long argued for an ethic of conversation (Ricoeur 2000, 116ff.) that includes a level of respect for the other as well as a general rule that anyone can jump in at any point in the conversation. What this means for our dialogue is that the conversation must have a focus to effectively draw in the resources of the participants but must also proceed with the assumption that no one group has the privilege to set the agenda. A dialogue flows and emerges from the process of conversation, with movement and

concepts and disagreements negotiated along the way. This is a good beginning point.

Still, we might learn from interreligious dialogue and its long history. Many years ago I suggested four elements of such dialogue that guide both the conversation and the participation of the conversants. What is required is (1) openness to the other as other (let them have the right to define their own views and identity), (2) openness to the truth in another's view (openness to explore all areas of belief), (3) openness to learn anew about one's own tradition, and (4) openness to risk change (Moore 1986, 202ff.) Thus, a dialogue is an openness to the possibility of what the dialogue can produce. There is some risk in such an openness, but it is the only way that the plurality of views and concerns can be fully respected in dialogue.

Even more than this, the emerging force of interreligious dialogue pushes us toward a dialogical ethic. That is, the genuine mutual respect that is imbedded in the dialogue is itself a goal for action beyond conversation. Such a momentum toward respect is intensified by the presence of the sciences (i.e., the scientists as participants in dialogue), because the sciences lead us toward the practical and technical issues that we must confront together, both in dialogue and in action. The trick is to transport the ethic of dialogue into the treatment of these matters so that we are moved more and more toward common action. That is, we are challenged to invent ways that the acceptance of plurality and the openness to the other, as well as the new ideas and real changes reflected both in the dialogue and in developments in the sciences, can become a force for common action. To attain this we begin with dialogue, but always with the religious impulse toward the ethical/practical as a goal.

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